



*This picture has a dollop of peanut butter on one edge, a smear of grape jelly on the other, and an X across the whole thing. I cut it out of a magazine for homework when I was six years old. "Look for words that begin with W," my teacher, Mrs. Evans, had said.*

*She was the one who marked in the X, spoiling my picture. She pointed. "This is a picture of a family, Hollis. A mother, M, a father, F, a brother, B, a sister, S. They're standing in front of their house, H. I don't see one W word here."*

*I opened my mouth to say: How about W for wish, or W for want, or W for "Wouldn't it be lovely," like the song the music teacher had taught us?*

*But Mrs. Evans was at the next table by that time, shushing me over her shoulder.*

*"Whoo-ee!" said the kid with dirty nails who sat next to me. "You don't know anything, Hollis Woods."*

*I reached for my crayon and dug an X into her picture of a snow-white washing machine. "Too bad you can't use it to get your hands clean," I said.*

*When I think of my W picture deep inside my backpack under all the other pictures I've drawn, I think of that poor washing machine kid who cried over her ruined picture, and the frowning Mrs. Evans, who told me to sit in the hall with a timeout T letter for the rest of that long afternoon. "You don't deserve to be with the rest of us today," she said.*

*I sat for a while looking at a picture of a pointy mountain. Someday I would climb a mountain like that. I'd build a little house and maybe I'd have a horse that would live right in the house with me, and a dog and a cat.*

*When I saw the principal coming down the hall, I picked myself up and walked out the door. The woman I was staying with—I called her the lemon lady because of the way her mouth caved in—made me stay in the yard all weekend for that. "You think you're so tough," she said. "I'll show you tough."*

*That foolish woman forgot that as long as I had a pencil and paper, I'd get along. I drew her with her pursed-up lips, then tied her picture to the tree for target practice with*

gravel from the path.

But when I think of my W picture, mostly I think of the Regans' house in Branches. I think of the Old Man, and Izzy, and their son, Steven. All they needed to match my picture was a girl, G.

And that's what I thought the morning I ran away from them, touching the great holly bushes, feeling their sharpness, and the sticky evergreen branches that hung over the dirt road leading to town. I stopped to look up at the mountain, and then at the house half hidden in the trees, the gray porch tacked on the front, screens bellying out, the chimney leaning, the two windows upstairs that had been in my bedroom, and the river in front.

My river, the Delaware.

That day I thought I'd never see any of it again. N, never, and in my mind I drew an X over all of them, and over me, too.